SING A NEW SONG
Psalm 96:1, Matthew 5:38-42
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In Edinburgh, capital city of Scotland, the Cathedral of St. Giles sits prominently on the High Street, in the middle of the Royal Mile, between Edinburgh Castle at the head of the street, and the Palace of Holyrood House at the far end. It was once a Roman Catholic Church, as its name implies, the Cathedral Church of the diocese. For brief intervals it was Church of England, and since the Reformation it has been Presbyterian, called the High Kirk of Edinburgh. Its most famous pastor was John Knox, and it has seen some of the stormiest history in the Western world. Its current pastor, Gillespeach MacMillan, met a group of Broad Street young people this summer, talked about the building and the Scottish Reformation and arranged for a private tour guided by an Elder of the current congregation.

St. Giles is a special place for Presbyterians who have a sense of their history. It's the closest thing to a Vatican we have. I loved being there. What I loved most about the place is one of its less elegant attractions. In the back, on a pillar near the side aisle is a plaque which marks the spot from which a modest parishioner, Jennie Geddes, in the year 1637, threw her stool at the Bishop, who was in the pulpit at the moment. The situation was this: after the stormy confrontations between John Knox and Mary Queen of Scots in the middle of the sixteenth century, Mary lost her head, and the Church of Rome was out. But Mary's son, James, became King of all Britain and began immediately to bring back his own Roman tradition in the form of Bishops. His son Charles I went a step further and decreed the use of high church liturgy and the English Prayerbook throughout the realm.

That's what upset Jennie Geddes. She liked the freer services of her Kirk. On the Sunday when Laud's Prayerbook was introduced to the St. Giles congregation, the Dean of Edinburgh was leading the service. There was such an uproar, however, that the Bishop himself, David Lindsey, stood in the pulpit to read. That's when Jennie Geddes picked up the stool she brought to sit on, threw it at him and shouted, "Fause loon, dost thou say Mass at my lug!"

A riot broke out, spilled into the street, another period of violence ensued and spread throughout the borders. Not long after, Church of Scotland leaders, called Covenanters, met at Grey Friar's Church and signed documents in their own blood, pledging to defend the doctrine and principles of the Church of Scotland. Charles sent his armies; ultimately he was overthrown and beheaded and the struggle waxed and waned for a generation.

It isn't a very elegant incident, certainly violent and I'm sure the current users of the High Kirk of St. Giles would like to forget it. But it does say a bit about the relationship of freedom to tradition in our branch of the church. It is also a reminder to the clergy, that there is danger inherent in tampering with what the people of the church regard as important tradition: not that it shouldn't be tampered with or unapologetically thrown out periodically. It is simply a warning that to do so is to risk having a stool thrown at one, in a lesson we have all learned on occasion.

I hear an echo of that dynamic in both texts this morning. Psalm 96 is an enthronement Psalm. In the post-exile period of Israel's history, the king was crowned once a year. It was a kind of political, theological renewal of the lease for another twelve months. The occasion was highly ceremonial, with orchestras, antiphonal choirs and a great procession to the temple. Often new music was

commissioned. Psalm 96 was a new composition, for that occasion. It begins, "Sing a new song to the Lord."

The important thing to remember about that bit of history is Israel's confidence that God is doing something new - always - old traditions aren't adequate. The Lord of creation and history is out in front of His people, calling them into the future.

In the time of Jesus, several centuries later, that up-beat futuristic theology is gone. Tradition has solidified. Under the duress of Roman occupations the devout Jews were holding on to their laws and customs for dear life. No one had said anything new for decades. Part of the resistance Jesus of Nazareth encountered was a product of that, and part was the simple disagreement some people have with anything new, any departure from the past. Part of the conflict, inherent in His life, was the resistance to change which seems somehow to find its most receptive arena within religious institutions.

Over and over again, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spelled it out. "You have heard that it was said...but I say to you." He pressed for a new ethic, a new life, a new theology. The old way is revenge, retribution, eye for an eye...But something new is going on now - turn your other cheek - love your enemy...To be faithful to that is to be willing to think <u>new</u> about ethical dilemmas peculiar to our age.

Our situation today, in the church, is complex. In Europe, the traditional churches are moribund. David Read estimates that there are more Muslims than Methodists in England, and more Atheists in Sweden than in the Soviet Union. In Africa, the church is growing more rapidly than ever and indigenous churches have so much energy and vitality that missionary activity is beginning and pointed in our direction. In this country two things are happening. Traditional churches are declining: Methodist, Congregational, Episcopal, Presbyterian churches are either losing members or lying dead in the water, statistically. In the meantime, non-traditional, independent churches are experiencing phenomenal growth. Religion isn't declining, but traditional religion is.

There are many, many people trying to discover the reasons for the development. Most tend to oversimplify. My opinion is that it has something to do with our relationship to tradition and history. My opinion is that we vacillate between too much and too little.

I think there is a sense in which we suffer from too little history. The 1960s in this culture experienced what one scholar called historical amnesia. All emphasis was on the present experience: it was called, you will remember, "the now generation". The 1970s, by contrast, nodded in the direction of the past, but only slightly. The "me" generation got nostalgic and looked back, about twenty years. The church, in my estimation, reflected a similar dynamic - We have bounced from frantic efforts to be relevant to a continuing love affair with turn-of-the-century music: none of which deals fairly with the reality of a Reformed Tradition four hundred years old, and a Catholic tradition as old as Western Civilization.

And we have held far too tightly, as well. We have held onto obsolete music, vocabulary, ways of worshipping, learning and serving that haven't been relevant for centuries. We have, in the words of one critic, "sat smugly on our conventional creeds, scorning every attempt to relate to a revolutionary world, a world that has

changed more in the past fifty years than the previous five hundred." (Read The Faith Is Still There).

Dean Inge used to say that "whoever marries the spirit of the age is doomed soon to be a widower." And he said it before the accelerated, radical change which is the only predictable thing about our culture.

Reformation Sunday. And part of the tradition we celebrate today is that God isn't really much of a traditionalist: that can be counted on to be an innovator. We will observe the occasion by listening to great music, out of the past, an integral part of the tradition, which itself was once a "new song to the Lord". And part of what always happens to me while listening to J.S.Bach is the certainty that the God who inspired the beauty of that music is still in the business of inspiring beauty.

The important part of the Reformation tradition is the theology of a God radically involved in the world. The church may try to confine Him with safe walls of tradition, but this God leads from in front, not behind, He is a God in the future as well as the past. An important part of the tradition is the acknowledgement that to be a church of the Reformation is to be a reforming church.

Jesus Christ called His disciples into the future and promised them that He would greet them there. He promised singing and dancing and a banquet feast - in the future. That is something of what it means to follow Him today. One of the most helpful theological insights I ever encountered described the process of creation as a pull from the future, rather than a push from the past. As I relate that to the life I know and live, I observe that faith for many of us is lodged solely in the memory of the past. That is to say, until we've lived through something and until enough time has elapsed for it to become history, it will not have much religious significance for us.

In the meantime, what lies ahead keeps looking frightening. The church faces an uncertain future - and personally each of us confronts aging, sickness, suffering, dying. Those experiences are the source of anxiety, dread - what the philosophers have called "sickness unto death". But what if we turn the theology upside down, or what if we throw the stool at the Bishop? What if we place our bets on a God who is already in the future, waiting for us? What if we place our trust and faith in a God of love who beckons us to our tomorrows in the full confidence that He is already there?

My guess is that the transition would be a conversion for many of us, that the "God of ages past" would, truly, become "our hope for years to come", and that the new songs we sing to the Lord would be heard all over creation.

Amen.